Introduction to Theory: A Useful Reference

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This is a reference guiding blueprint on how theory can help you develop your intellectual and emotional awareness. The document has a practical design that aims and helping you know what a theory is, what it does, and what it can do for you in your research. I have set out a sequence to help make these very challenging concepts more accessible:

- First, I introduce what a theory is and what it does.
- Second, I consider reasons why you would want to use a theory when researching human behaviors and actions.
- Third, I provide an overview of the themes that connect different theories.
- Fourth, I chronologically list (so, in order by their emergence over time) many social science theories within a table.
- Fifth, the goal here is for you to recognize what your worldview already is by seeing how your opinions and perspectives more closely align with one theory more so than the others.

You can then apply the theory and the associated theorist's work by connecting it to your own research project. As you complete your studies over time, say perhaps in a semester or a year from now, ask yourself how your perspective alignment may have changed as you learn more and complete increasingly more authentic self-improvement through studying.

Introducing what, how, and why

What is a theory and what does a theory do?

- Theories explain generalizable concepts which can be applied to multiple events at different times and places.
- Each one uses detailed assumptions about how and/or why people behave the way they do.
- Since they tell a story of what happened, how, and why, they also predict what is likely to happen next.
- Some theories are more accurate and applicable to certain types of research than others.

Why would we want to know a range of theories in the context of studying history, political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, legal studies, social justice, and/or human rights?

- Theory provides structure, framework, and direction for research, exploratory, intellectual, and emotional growth.
- Think of theory as a box in which real-world cases exist. You can open and close the box when you have the time, energy, focus, and resilience to encounter the many different events and trends of human behavior.
- By learning how the past has shaped our present, we can reexamine and perhaps even resolve unsettling issues.
- Being unsettled is a visceral reaction to awakening and becoming aware of past-and-present injustices.
- Theory offers an abstract set of tools which allow us a way to go into the deep dive on potentially traumatic content.
- Theory is not necessarily traumatic, but it is common so go slow when researching anything to do with people.

Themes (and memes) of theories

Conflict

- Realism
- Just war theory
- Great hero (man) of history
- Critical studies
- Marxism
- Critical race studies
- Cultural hegemony
- Decolonization
- Dependency
- Conflict theory
- Necropolitics

Competition

- Mercantilism
- Rise and fall arc
- Utilitarianism
- Positivism
- Feminism and gender analysis
- Functional structural
- Cyclical civilizations
- Neorealism
- Neoliberalism
- Modernization
- Symbolic interaction

Cooperation

- Virtue ethics
- Universalism
- Liberalism
- Economic liberalism
- Environmentalism
- Cultural relativism
- Peace studies
- Recursive relationships
- Indigenous justice studies
- Constructivism

Table of social science theories in chronological order

On first contact, you should just scan through the content to see what jumps out at you as something familiar. That spark is what you are looking for as it signals that the theory resonates with you and your research.

Name	Summary definition	Explanation, timeline, and academic discipline	Scholars
Realism	The strong will dominate the weak in a state and across regions	Since sovereignty orders who is the most powerful (influential), conflict over this order is more likely than cooperation so prepare accordingly. The strong will do as they like while the weak will suffer and attempt to survive. Dog-eat-dog, life is brutish and short, so support the strong leader. Assumes that war is inevitable. Since early empires of Sumer, approximately 4500 BCE (first recorded approximately 400 BCE). History and political science.	Thucydides (first "objective" historian in contrast to mythmaker Herodotus), Thomas Hobbes

Virtue ethics	Comparing community values allows individuals to improve life	Using political science, examining one's own home community alongside other (foreign) groups reveals variables that can be adjusted in cause and effect, improving moral principles and ethical choices. Since Athenian democracy, around 340 BCE. Multidisciplinary uses, founded political science.	Aristotle (first political scientist)
Just war theory	Some warfare is morally justified	While an option of last resort, waging war in pursuit of civilizational survival is both necessary and morally justified, even when one's own religious beliefs command believers not to kill. Rules of warfare limit and regulate these religious combatants. 390s CE	Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas
Mercantilism	Regulations on trade and foreign relations that aim to put national interests first	Recent examples include the British Empire, early US republic western expansion, and Chinese economic policy of "one belt one road." Used in practice since early empires of Sumer, approximately 4500 BCE. Term mercantilism first used to describe the Elizabethan era British Empire, 1570s. Economics, history, and political science.	Antonio Serra, Alexander Hamilton

Universalism	Every society in the world can and should follow the ethical and moral norms of an international group	International progressive and modern groups live better lives and protect rights more than local groups. Since 1700s Enlightenment. First philosophy and now interdisciplinary.	Immanuel Kant
Liberalism	Certain people will form groups to cooperate in a state and across regions	Built upon realism with more cooperation. Hunter-gatherers, different roles in a community. Democracies increase trade with other democracies leading to their avoiding war and resulting in peace. Since 1700s Enlightenment. Philosophy and political science.	Jean Jacques Rousseau
Economic liberalism	No or less government intrusion of free market, free trade	Examples include NAFTA, EU, globalization, cooperative international monetary policies and trade agreements. Since post-feudal capitalism of 1770s. Economics, history, and political science.	Adam Smith

Rise and fall arc	Great powers, empires, with international reach decay and collapse	While expansion happens through interacting, often oppressing, outsider communities, the fall of a major power happens through internal decline, waste by elites. Since modern imperialis, 1770s. History.	Edward Gibbon
Utilitarianism	Government and society should work for the best interests of the most people	Majoritarian population benefits from the costs derived and sometimes burdened upon a scapegoated group. Since Enlightenment, the 1780s. Multidisciplinary uses.	Jeremy Bentham
Positivism	Science can track and correct unwanted human behavior trends	Using scientific measurement and experiment, elites can use institutions to positively improve society by influencing groups and individuals. Led to social Darwinism and eugenics, influenced most genocidal regimes and founded behavioral psychology. Since stable post-revolutionary modern state era of 1830s. Multidisciplinary uses.	Auguste Comte, Francis Galton, Herbert Spencer, B. F. Skinner

Great hero (man) of history	A leader's heroic actions improve societies and governments	A "past-washing" reconstruction of historic rulers that emphasizes the victors in a conflict. The historians in favor of conquest, imperialism, and colonization. Since 1840s. History.	Thomas Carlyle
* Critical studies (* more than one theory)	Power that harms some for the benefit of others is to be mistrusted, scrutinized, and critiqued in search of reforms	Reacting to the bias of scientific institutions of the Enlightenment, critical scholars sought to rectify the wrongs of pseudoscientific hangovers that survived into the modern era from feudal societies, many of which still continue to persist today due in part to cultural relativism. Influential since its beginning at the Frankfurt School in the 1920s. Multidisciplinary uses.	Herbert Marcuse, Guy Debord, Michel Foucault
Feminism and gender analysis	Gendered, sex-based differences result in unequal political behaviors and systems in	Patriarchy, women as second-class citizens, women as property, lack of political rights, more violations of their human rights. Also extends to "hidden" forms of sex and gender-based behavior choices which impact each population group in different ways.	Judith Butler, bell hooks

	states, regions, and across the world	Three waves (1850s to 1920s focused on economic reform, 1950s to 1970s focused on social reform, 1990s to present focused on identity reform). Multidisciplinary uses.	
Marxism	Economic inequalities shape political behaviors in a state + across regions	2 types of people: (1) owners and (2) workers of wealth- creating item-producing goods and systems, aka the modes and means of production. Since Marx, 1860s. Multidisciplinary uses.	Karl Marx
Functional structural	Ordered hierarchy is necessary for success	Societies work well when governments and corporations utilize and empower comparatively more effective individuals. Since the emergence of social sciences in 1870s. Sociology and political science.	Émile Durkheim, Max Weber
* Critical race studies (*more than one theory)	A collection of scholarly works, some of which provide theories. Most works often	Inequality derives from structural asymmetrical power dynamics at play through the lens of race, ethnicity, nationality, and citizenry. The functional aspects that a majority enjoys, or experiences, contribute to the causes of inequality and injustice.	W.E.B. Du Bois, Derrick Bell,

	employ conflict theory to examine race relations.	Since U.S. Reconstruction, 1870s. Multidisciplinary uses.	Kimberlé Crenshaw
Cultural relativism	Local societies have formed the ethical and moral norms that suit those populations	Local groups know what is best for their people and outsiders should not interfere with those traditions and beliefs. Since 1890s. Anthropology and sociology.	Franz Boas
Cyclical civilizations	Cultures grow or decline due to the presence or absence of (re)imaginatively creative leaders	The most significant civilizations in world history developed because of the ingenuity of leaders that sustained their society through multiple generations during which imaginative inventions added to the increased benefit of the population. The revolving cycle grows or declines in size and significance because of the actions or inaction of the civilization's leaders. Since the end of World War One, 1920s. History.	Arnold Toynbee
Cultural hegemony	Elites dominate society and use	The potential corruption of functional structural, uses democracy and republican forms of social	Antonio Gramsci

	institutions to subdue rival groups and individuals	managements as a guise to maintain power within existing elite groups. Excuses corruption and oppression for the sake of the benefits provided by nationalism and imperialism. Explained in the 1930s, published after WWII. Multidisciplinary uses.	
Environmentalism	The land and other natural materials, sometimes, should be prioritized above the people	Since the industrial revolution has wrought untold damage to nature, policies should restrict human action and repair at least some of the harm, preserve wild spaces, and limit pollution. Since 1949 Multidisciplinary uses.	Aldo Leopold
Neorealism	The strong will dominate the weak across the world	Politics in multipolar systems; unipolar, bipolar, multipolar. Assumes that groups of allies will assist each other against their differently oriented enemies. Since 1950s. Political science.	Kenneth Waltz

Peace studies	Despite the tragedy of (neo)realist actions, people can live in peace	By knowing how conflict works to then trace preconditions, causes, outcomes, and post-conflict societies, scholars can aid in the development of institutions that promote and sustain peace among people. Since 1950s. Sociology and political science.	Johan Galtung
Modernization	Western values increase the standard of living of people across the world	By using modern methods of accountability in government and economics, any population will benefit as a collective group. A reboot of positivism from the previous century, a “neo-positivism” across the world. Since the Cold War, 1960s. Sociology and political science.	Cyril Edwin Black, Francis Fukuyama
Decolonization	People at the bottom of a power structure are important and can change the system	Looks beyond the great hero leaders to examine what happens at other levels of a structured hierarchy including agricultural peasants and industrial workers, sometimes with the aim of dismantling that system. Subaltern studies, post-colonization, post-imperial forms of nationalism.	Frantz Fanon, Ranajit Guha

		Since decolonial era after World War Two, 1950s. Multidisciplinary uses.	
Neoliberalism	Certain people will form groups to cooperate across the world	Interdependent relations connect states to each other and to cooperative intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) such as the League of Nations and the United Nations. Assumes that nations will revert to realism so therefore multilateral international institutions provide more opportunities for cooperation. Since 1970s. Political science.	Joseph Nye, Robert Keohane
Recursive relationships	An individual can influence a society while at the same time a society can influence an individual	Prominent leaders and change-makers that drive societies and states to reform, progress, conserve, or radically transform societal norms that shape the options and choices of individuals. Since institutional postmodernism rise in 1970s. Sociology.	Anthony Giddens

Dependency	Economic inequalities shape political behaviors across the world	Lower income states + societies depend on middle + upper income states + societies. Core economies rule over semi-periphery and periphery places, World Systems Theory. Based on conflict theory and Marxism, a "neo-conflict" approach of global analysis. Since emergence of globalization, 1970s. Economics and political science.	Immanuel Wallerstein
Conflict theory	Groups of people, known as classes, will clash and conflict with each more so than cooperate	Leading example being Marxism. Scholars reinvented and repurposed Marx's writings and concepts of history, economics, and politics. Since postmodernism, 1970s. Sociology and anthropology.	Marx, again
Symbolic interaction	Symbols, stories, and myths convince people to behave in a predesigned way (more than just the	Nationalism is the most extensive construction of symbolic interaction because the various groups and individual perspectives are considered as secondary interests (if considered at all) to the primacy of government institutions and state authorities. Since Western cultural revolution of 1980s.	Benedict Anderson

	ideas of constructivism, below)	History.	
Indigenous justice studies	Places indigenous people at the center of social, economic, legal, and political issues	Reaction to the fallout from the Civil Rights movement and the expansion of globalization, primary led by activists and scholars in North America. Aims at regaining tribal sovereign-adjacent authority, governance, and norms. Rejects western dominance, calls for internally coded beliefs, practices, restorative justice, and ethics by promoting self-identification and empowerment of local ancestral land connected communities. Since globalized capitalism, 1980s. Multidisciplinary uses.	Gerald Vizenor
Constructivism	Ideas drive political behaviors	Anarchy exists because states – and societies – uphold it. Assumes that cultures have entrenched relative differences, similarities, and rates of change. Because of the capacity to change, predicts that societies can	Alex Wendt

		shape politics in whatever way they want. Limited by the sovereign authority of powerful states. Since post-Cold War, 1990s. Political science and sociology.	
Necropolitics	Governments and powerful non-state groups use a deadly form of utilitarianism to take and maintain control of people and resources.	Among the most stinging of critical theories, condemns governments that hoard power as functionally immoral and unworthy of any social, political, or economic support. A counter to Michel Foucault's concept of "biopolitics" Since the War on Terror, 2000s. Multidisciplinary uses.	Achille Mbembe

Final thoughts! Drawing activity

An activity that can really help with clarifying your comprehension of a theory is drawing an illustration of the main concept in the theory. The drawing may be either an abstract representation or reference a real-world case that connects to the theory. I have posted some examples of some illustrations alongside the theme categories.

If you can draw it, you know it well enough to explain it to someone else and therefore apply it to your own research!